

BUILD A BEAUTIFUL BACK WITH PILATES

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From running around with the kids, to making that early morning meeting, to getting in that last rep at the gym, we're trying to fit it all in. No matter what your day looks like, we know one thing's for sure— a strong back is essential for every activity you tackle. In fact, building a strong back can help you burn more calories, prevent poor posture and neck strain, and even make your waist look smaller, when sculpted proportionately to your upper body. So it's no secret that the back muscles are essential to overall functional fitness.

When it comes to building a beautiful back with Pilates, it's important to understand the basic elements of this form of exercise. Although you should always consult your physician before starting any fitness routine, a Pilates workout is gentle and controlled, with no sudden jarring actions. It is therefore vital that you work with a qualified instructor to ensure that you are doing the movements correctly. An experienced instructor will be able to modify the exercises to accommodate your limitations, continually challenge you within your range, and monitor your improvements. If you commit yourself to a consistent workout schedule you will certainly feel (and see) results.

Unlike regular weight training, Pilates is three-dimensional (i.e., exercises can be performed using all movement planes) and emphasis is placed on rebalancing muscles around the joints, while balancing strength with flexibility. Weight training and STOTT PILATES® can be combined in your fitness program and are a great complement to each other.

Lower Back Pain

Lower back pain is not an uncommon issue even amongst those who train regularly. It can result from a number of causes. In many people, day-to-day backache is not a consequence of a sudden injury, but rather the product of years of poor posture, bad habits and a lack of body awareness.

Many chronic injuries— those that occur over time as opposed to a single fall or blow— are a product of muscle imbalances through the body. The lower back is no excep-



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tion. When the muscles of the torso are weak and de-conditioned, there is no support for the structures of the lower back— and pain and discomfort result. Pilates will address these concerns through the attention to the core.

"Pilates is a kinder, gentler exercise for your body, with all of the benefits of strength training," says Moira Merrithew, Executive Director of Education, STOTT PILATES®. "At the same time, it [Pilates] helps build strong, healthy muscles, improves blood flow, and engages all the muscles at the right time, therefore working your body inside and out for optimal body conditioning."

Moira further explains that the emphasis on breathing allows exercisers to focus their minds on what their bodies are doing. "Ultimately, Pilates is all about using breath more effectively so we can increase awareness and focus in our everyday lives— making the mind-body connection truly effective."

Core Training

Although 'core training' may be a bit of a catch phrase in the fitness industry, the true definition of the term is widely acknowledged in medical and rehabilitation communities as the basis for reconditioning the support musculature of the body. Pilates as a method of exercise focuses on working the muscles from the inside-out, rather than the outside-in. In this way, the deepest layers of muscles in the torso, transversus abdominis, lumbar multifidi and pelvic floor to name a few, are trained to protect the lower back while allowing the body to perform movements with more ease and fluidity. This is achieved by performing controlled movements, and by paying special attention to the mind-body connection.

Unfortunately, it is not only the muscles of the lower back that cause us to experience pain in this area. Hunched shoulders, curved upper back, forward head and other postural misalignments can contribute to lumbar discomfort. The wide range of exercises available in the Pilates repertoire can work to restore balance and proper alignment throughout the body, thus reducing back pain due to stress and fatigue.

"Pilates helps people of all ages and fitness experiences overcome aches and pains and therefore can enjoy everyday activities," explains Lindsay G. Merrithew, President and CEO, STOTT PILATES®. "The attention to proper alignment and good posture that Pilates offers through its numerous variations of movement, with or without specialized equipment, is a natural carryover into regular living."

The Plank

Pilates focuses on restoring balance, as well as strengthening muscles in a concentric and eccentric fashion— on the 'in' and the 'out' movements— which can ultimately help improve muscular control, which may prevent future injuries. When concentrating on the back muscles, one of the most effective strengthening exercises is the Plank. The Plank position can be done by most exercisers, at any fitness level.

In its most simple version, the torso is held in a neutral position while resting on the hands, arms extended under the shoulders, legs adducted and scapulae stabilized. Maintaining the plank position requires isometric contractions from the core stabilizers, including transversus abdominis and multifidus.

Engagement of the internal and external obliques as well as the rectus abdominis is needed to ensure neutral alignment of the spine. Scapular stabilizers including the serratus anterior, middle and lower trapezius and latissimus dorsi are also targeted to hold the shoulder blades in optimal alignment. In the lower body, adductors of the inner thigh help to maintain pelvic position and to activate the muscles of the pelvic floor.

Glutes and hamstrings are also involved in holding the pelvis and femurs stable throughout the duration of the exercise. Successful execution of the Plank encourages a full-body connection and optimal strengthening. Modifications of the Plank can be performed with either the elbows or knees flexed, reducing the number of joints being stabilized.

Variations of the Plank

Pilates specific variations of the Plank include the Leg Pull Front Prep on the Mat and the Long Stretch on the Reformer. The Leg Pull Front Prep is an excellent exercise to build up to the full Plank while ensuring the best possible alignment. To begin, kneel on hands and knees with the hands right under the shoulders and the knees on the mat. The knees

should be slightly behind the pelvis, the hips slightly extended with the legs adducted and the toes tucked under. Most importantly, the lumbar, thoracic and cervical spine should all be in neutral alignment.

On an exhale, extend the knees while maintaining the stable neutral position in the spine and shoulders. On an inhale, flex the knees and lower them down to the mat. Gradually extend the length of time in the Plank position by adding breaths while there. The Long Stretch on the Reformer challenges the strength of the Plank position while flexing and extending the shoulders.

Start with the hands on the footbar directly under the shoulders and the feet against the headrest. Knees and hips are extended with the full spine in neutral. There should be a straight line from the heels to the top of the head. On an inhale, flex the shoulders to push the carriage out, while keeping the spine long. On an exhale, extend the shoulders and control the return of the carriage. To increase the challenge with this exercise, gradually decrease the tension on the Reformer. This will require the core stabilizers to work harder to maintain the spinal position as the arms reach forward.

For more information on STOTT PILATES® exercises, education and equipment, visit www.stottpilates.com ■

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